

WHO FOR US MEN AND OUR SALVATION:
THE DOWNWARD AND UPWARD SWEEP OF THE GOSPEL

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And the Word Became Flesh

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹ With these well-known words, the apostle John emphasizes the mystery and wonder of the incarnation; the Word, the eternally existent Logos, the Son of God, “became human without ceasing to be God” and came down from Heaven to dwell among us in the person of Jesus Christ.² God the Son came to redeem us so that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters by grace.³ For in the great history of God’s love and care for his people, all redemptive arrows point down.⁴

The purpose of this paper is to examine the essential truth of the Christian faith proclaimed in the two great creeds of the early Church—“for us men and our salvation, he came down.”⁵ The great downward and upward sweep of the gospel encompasses what we hold to be true; since man cannot rise up to God, he must come down to us. In this paper, I will examine the reason for God coming down in the one person of Jesus Christ followed by a brief survey of four of the heresies that surfaced during the first centuries of the Church: Gnosticism, Marcionism, Arianism, and Nestorianism. Each heresy compromises the downward sweep of the gospel, and the early Church Fathers responded by defending the deity, humanity, and unity of the Son. Just

¹ John 1:4.

² Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 133.

³ Athanasius, *Against the Arians* II.61; Gal. 4:4-7.

⁴ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 225.

⁵ The Creed of Nicaea (The Council of Nicaea - AD 325) and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (The Council of Constantinople - AD 381) both contain the important phrase “who because of us men and our salvation, came down ...”; The Nicene Creed adds “from heaven”.

as the early Church was challenged by teachings that questioned the deity and the two natures in one person of Jesus Christ, so is the Church today. Without an understanding of our great need for God to come down and the downward movement of God the Son, we fail to appreciate the fullness of the upward sweep of the gospel, which restores our relationship with God and brings us into fellowship with the Father and Son.

In the Fullness of Time

In the Temple, the old man who had waited so faithfully held the baby in his arms and exclaimed, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for *my eyes have seen your salvation* that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”⁶ Long had Simeon waited for the Redeemer, for the fulfillment of the promise given centuries before. Long had Israel, God’s chosen people, waited for the Messiah who would fulfill the promises spoken by the prophets. This baby—this Jesus—at last had come to save his people from their sins, to set the captives free, and to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth.⁷ As Simeon had prophesied, this salvation was for all people, for the child born in the city of David was Christ the Lord.⁸

In the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes of the lavish spiritual blessings bestowed upon believers in Christ. In order to make known to us the mystery of his will, God “set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”⁹ From the time of the fall in Genesis, God’s plan of restoration was

⁶ Luke 2:25-30, italics added.

⁷ Matt. 1:21; Luke 4:18; Isa. 61:1-2; Matt. 4:17.

⁸ Luke 2:14.

⁹ Eph. 1:10.

evident, promised in the Old Testament as the future Redeemer and realized in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus announced, “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand,” revealing that the eternal kingdom had broken in, invading time with the advent of the promised One.¹⁰ God’s purposes and plans were fulfilled when he sent the Son—the second person of the Trinity who existed from eternity past—to be born as a man, fully human and fully God. Paul summarized the advent of the Redeemer and the purposes of his coming in his letter to the Galatians: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”¹¹ His purpose was to redeem all of creation and restore that which human beings lost in the fall—a share in the communion and fellowship of the Trinity.¹² In considering why the Son had to come down, Cyril of Jerusalem answers the “why” question and underscores our need for a Savior: “First, let us ask why Jesus came down. Do not look for subtle arguments from me. . . . Our Father did not ignore our doomed race. He sent his Son the Lord from heaven to be our Healer.”¹³

Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12-19 lays the groundwork for understanding that “death originated in the human race because of Adam’s sin” and all men inherited a corrupted and sinful nature.¹⁴ The third commandment the Lord gave in the Garden was to not eat from the tree of the

¹⁰ Mark 1:14-15.

¹¹ Gal. 4:4-5.

¹² Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 212.

¹³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechism* 12:5,8.

¹⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 579-581.

knowledge of good and evil, for “in the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.”¹⁵ Deceived by Satan, Adam and Eve ate of the tree, and the relationship of man to God and to the world was forever changed by sin.¹⁶ Their discontentment and choice to exercise moral autonomy in order to “be like God” led Adam and Eve to doubt God’s word and his known character.¹⁷ This “inherent tendency to do wrong is what the Bible calls sin.”¹⁸

In his *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Athanasius describes Creation and the Fall as turning from eternal things to things corruptible, a decision which eventually led to death, both physical and spiritual, as God had warned in Genesis 2:

This, then, was the plight of men. God had not only made them out of nothing, but had also graciously bestowed on them His own life by the grace of the Word. Then, turning from eternal things to things corruptible, by counsel of the devil, they had become the cause of their own corruption in death. ... When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment.¹⁹

The story of the Fall has been challenged as mythical for centuries. However, if the biblical account does not describe real events, then God did not create a good world, either intentionally or because of lack of power.²⁰ If man has always been sinful, then we are not responsible for our wrongdoing—God would be at fault.²¹ And we know those things cannot be true of a good and holy God.

¹⁵ Gen. 2:16-17.

¹⁶ Gen. 3:6.

¹⁷ Donald Fairbairn, Lecture 21: “The Fall and Its Consequences,” TH 501: Theology I, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Semlink+, Spring 2016; Gen. 3:1-19.

¹⁸ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 88.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 1.5.

²⁰ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 89-90.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 89; Rom. 2:17-23; Rom 2:15.

In defining sin, it is easy to consider the causes of sin such as ignorance, error, or the character of sin (including treachery, perversion, or iniquity).²² Or perhaps we think sin is equivalent to its consequences, such as guilt or a broken relationship with God. However, the Hebrew words for sin convey the ideas of missing the mark, transgressing a boundary, rebelling against God's authority, or distorting one's character.²³ In God's eyes, "sin involves a person's whole being."²⁴ Sin is the failure to live up to what God expects of us—a lack of conformity to God's moral law, whether by word, deed, or thought.²⁵

For both Jews with the written law and Gentiles with the law written on their hearts, all men are without excuse before God.²⁶ For the shame-based cultures of the East, the collective legacy of sin derived from Adam's sin and condemnation is easily understood. In our western world, where we see only particular sinful deeds committed by individuals, the outcome is "an inadequate view of both the depth of human sin and the height of divine grace."²⁷ Yet as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."²⁸ Paul charges that "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin," adding a quote from the Psalms: "None is righteous, no, not one ... there is no fear of God before their eyes."²⁹ All have sinned—no aspect of a person's being is unaffected by sin. We are "dead in our sin," and sin has "so twisted

²² Erickson, 520-525.

²³ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 98-99.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Erickson, 528-529.

²⁶ Rom. 2:15-29.

²⁷ Timothy J. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 96.

²⁸ Rom. 3:23.

²⁹ Rom. 3:10, 18; Ps. 14:1-3; Ps. 36:1.

our character that when it comes to our ability to work our way back into a relation with God, we can do no more than if we were actually dead.”³⁰

Redemption originates not from man but from God. We cannot rise up to God; therefore, God must come down to us as he has revealed throughout redemptive history.³¹ Professor Donald Fairbairn explains it this way:

Christianity affirms that what is necessary for people to be united to the true God is *not* something that fallen human beings can do ourselves. It follows, therefore, that if we are to be saved, God has to come to us. Scripture describes God’s descent to us in many ways—God’s calling of Abraham, his leading Israel out of Egypt, the establishment of Israel as a nation, etc. But all of these events are precursors to two main descents: the incarnation and the descent of the Holy Spirit to indwell believers. In short, our salvation is accomplished because the Son of God has come down to live *among* us, and the Holy Spirit has come down to live *within* each of us.³²

The renowned theologian Thomas F. Torrance writes that the unity of God and man is accomplished from the side of God: “The very fact that it takes God almighty—and even he at such desperate cost—to join God and man in Jesus Christ, tells us in unmistakable language that this is not what we can do. We are unable to bridge the gap between God and man, nor can we ascend up to heaven and bring God down from there.”³³ The human race cannot do anything about reaching God for we cannot save ourselves nor can we restore our fellowship with God. Hope only emerges when we admit we are helpless or even dead on our own.

³⁰ Col. 2:13 (NIV); Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 102.

³¹ Fairbairn, Lecture 4: “Patristic Theology,” TH 501: Theology I.

³² Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, forthcoming August 2019), Chapter 4; The author(s) note “these were the two main *past* descents. Two others will come in the future: the second descent of Christ to earth, and finally the descent of the Father as he brings heaven with him and establishes the new heavens and new earth.”

³³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 9.

Scripture, however, gives great hope. Throughout the Old Testament, God prepared the way for the coming of Christ—the fulfillment of the promise of a single person from the line of King David who would be a blessing for the world. And with increasing specificity, God revealed what the Redeemer would do and who this person would be: the divine Son of God.³⁴ This redeemer would be God Himself as the second person of the Trinity, the Word, the *Logos*, “by whom God communicates to humanity.”³⁵ As Torrance writes,

Everything in Christianity centres on the incarnation of the Son of God, an invasion of God among men and women in time, bringing and working out a salvation not only understandable by them in their own historical and human life and existence, but historically and concretely accessible to them on earth and in time, in the midst of their frailty, contingency, relativity and sin.³⁶

As the Creed of Constantinople (Nicene Creed, 381) states, the one Lord Jesus Christ came down from heaven “because of us men and our salvation.” Donald Fairbairn captures the nature of the great downward movement with these words: “Only if Christ is fully and unequivocally divine can God give us himself through Christ. And only if God the Logos has descended to the very depths of human experience can God meet us where we are, in order to fill us with his presence, with his grace, with himself.”³⁷ The central message of the Bible is Christ.

The One Indivisible Person of Jesus Christ

The opening verses of Genesis, which set the stage for the entire biblical narrative, are echoed in the New Testament: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and

³⁴ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 108, 121; See Gen. 12:2-3, 2 Sam. 11-16 and Isa. 9:6-7.

³⁵ Ibid., 131.

³⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1991, 2016), 8.

³⁷ Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 124.

the Word was God.”³⁸ The Word, present before the beginning of time and at creation, is the pre-existent Son and, therefore, was and is God. When the person of God the Son came down to earth to dwell among us, he added a complete human nature to his divine person. Known as Jesus Christ, he was both human and divine, not a person indwelt by God nor God living on earth as a man. He was both fully God and fully human, his two natures indivisible. Christ is God the Son “living personally on earth as one of us.”³⁹

How can this be? “Remaining what he was, he became what he was not,” an early theologian wrote.⁴⁰ Jesus did not give up his deity when he became a man. The incarnation, this union of God and man, is like the doctrine of the Trinity—a great and profound mystery. In 430 AD, Cyril of Alexandria wrote to Nestorius of the total union of the two natures, demonstrating there was no change in the divine nature of the Son when God himself “took on flesh.”⁴¹ Nor was the Word transformed into a human being. Instead, the Son “animated by having united to himself hypostatically flesh animated by a rational soul, inexplicably and incomprehensibly became man.”⁴² Without indicating precisely how to understand this mystery, the Council of Chalcedon (451) affirmed that Christ must be accepted as both truly human and truly God: “one and the same Son, perfect in divinity and humanity.”⁴³

³⁸ John 1:1.

³⁹ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 140-143.

⁴⁰ This quote appears in various forms and works, sometimes attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus without citation.

⁴¹ The conflict over Nestorianism and Cyril’s responses to his teaching are discussed in the section beginning on page 33.

⁴² St. Cyril of Alexandria, Letter 4.3.

⁴³ Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed. (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 238.

During the patristic period, there were two ways of understanding the union between humanity and divinity in the incarnation, one stressing the humanity of Jesus and the other emphasizing the deity of Christ. However, those differences reflected much deeper concerns than just matters of emphasis. It was primarily about whether Christ was God, capable of saving humanity, or if he was a mere man offering only an example to follow. In the incarnation, God took “the divine nature and united it with a full, concrete human nature which he created in Mary’s womb, so that the person resulting from this union, Jesus Christ, is both divine and human”.⁴⁴ This description of the incarnation shows the only way the Son is able to reconcile humanity to God.

The great Christological controversies, like the earlier Trinitarian controversies, are a dispute about the nature of salvation and how it is achieved. Christ is the same person he has always been. He is the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. He has always had the divine nature because he is the Son of God; he now also has a human nature because he took it into his own person at the incarnation. He is always the same person when acting in his divine or human nature, or whether the things that happen to him or things he does are appropriate to his deity or to his humanity.⁴⁵

“[Christ] remained Lord of all things even when he came ... Indeed the mystery of Christ runs the risk of being disbelieved precisely because it is so incredibly wonderful.”⁴⁶ In the midst of the turbulent times of the early Church, Cyril of Alexandria and other patristic theologians wrote of the wonder and the mystery of the person of Christ and the Trinity while driving stakes

⁴⁴ Donald Fairbairn, Supplemental Notes, TH 502: Theology II, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Charlotte, Fall 2016.

⁴⁵ Fairbairn, Lecture 23: “Patristic Christology,” TH 501: Theology I.

⁴⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, Translation and Introduction by John McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 61.

in the ground marking the contours of Christianity. As they battled the heretical teaching in each new generation, they hammered out the Christian understanding of the Trinity and of God the Son, bequeathing to us the orthodox faith we still affirm.

Heresy and the Rule of Faith

Heresy is an emotionally-charged term. Even today, when the accusation can be flung easily at anything one disagrees with, to be branded a heretic is an insult intellectually and culturally. As Dr. Donald Fairbairn explains to incoming seminary students in his introductory Church history class, “No one sets out to be a heretic. Rather than a deliberate distortion of the truth, heresy is a mistake or inadequacy which threatens the reality of salvation. It involves discontinuity with Scripture and what the Church has believed historically.”⁴⁷ In other words, heresy is a belief or teaching that is so great an error that it implies Christ could not save us.⁴⁸ These heresies faced by the early Church Fathers have a common basis—salvation is upward and man can rise up to God, though the means by which man may do so differ by the heresy in question.⁴⁹ Thus, these heretical beliefs compromise the downward sweep of the Gospel as foretold and fulfilled in Scripture.

The term “heresy” is derived from the Greek word *hairesis*, which originally meant a belief or action selected from among many options held by those within the Church. By the second century, however, heresy came to mean the conviction that these other options were intentional distortions or denials of the one revealed truth. Thus, heresy is a “false teaching

⁴⁷ Donald Fairbairn, Lecture 6: “Early Heresies and Christian Identity”, CH 501: The Church to the Reformation, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Charlotte, Fall 2015.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Donald Fairbairn, Lecture 1, CT 760: Readings in Christian Thought–Patristic Theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Charlotte, Fall 2018.

which leads people away from God’s revelation,” not merely another opinion, judgment, or belief.⁵⁰ Alister McGrath describes heresy as “an intellectually defective vision of the Christian faith, having its origins within the Church. The seeds of heresy may come from outside the church, but they take root in her garden. Heresy is not unbelief.”⁵¹

The early Church did not regard heresy as simply a dangerous challenge to church authority or to existing church structures. Instead, heresy targeted the future of Christianity itself. If the Great Church was contaminated by these “flawed, deficient, anemic, and inauthentic form[s] of the Christian faith,” the Church would inevitably falter and disappear amidst the pluralist, competitive world of ancient antiquity.⁵² Donald Fairbairn summarizes thus: “The gospel is an astonishingly new message, and it is not always easy for people to grasp all of its implications. It takes time, discussion, and even the rejection of mistakes in order to understand and articulate the truth of Scripture.”⁵³ The expression of important Christian doctrines was in direct opposition to the heretical teaching in question which resulted in the heresies being “recognized and refuted as the normative articulation of Christian doctrine emerged.”⁵⁴

In the late second century, the role of Irenaeus of Lyons in defining and defending the faith with his determined repudiation of Gnosticism was crucial as was that of Tertullian, who “urged self-definition and the maintenance of self-identity” as the Christian community.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Kenneth Warren Rick, “Heresy,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 550.

⁵¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 83.

⁵² McGrath, *Heresy*, 84.

⁵³ Fairbairn, PowerPoint 2: “Early Heresies and Christian Identity,” CT 760: Readings in Christian Thought—Patristic Theology.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ McGrath, *Heresy*, 89.

Throughout history, the Church often has responded to heretical teaching by further defining Orthodox beliefs. Although the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity and the person of Christ would not develop until the fourth through sixth centuries, doctrine or sound teaching became an important factor in shaping the identity of the Christian community early in the history of the Church.

During this period, the Fathers wrestled with words, yes, but there was so much more at stake than terminology. At the center of the debates were issues about salvation. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian Fathers, wrote during the fourth century Trinitarian controversy that the question of three gods was “not a minor subject...nor is it a kind to cause slight damage.”⁵⁶ For Gregory, to not bear witness to the deity of both Christ and the Holy Spirit was at once absurd and wicked.⁵⁷

In the introduction to *On the Unity of Christ* by Cyril of Alexandria, John Anthony McGuckin summarizes Cyril’s assessment of the reconciliation in The Formula of Reunion of 433 by stating: “He [Cyril] felt he had given ground on vocabulary but had not moved on matters of principle.”⁵⁸ Since John of Antioch represented the authentic Christology of the Syrian church, Cyril would negotiate and reconcile the language. With Nestorius and his heretical stance on dividing Christ into two persons, there could be no negotiation.

In Cyril of Alexandria’s view, the true faith unites, yet heresy divides. His concern for “correlating a highly intellectual theology with the lived experience of the ordinary Christian” is

⁵⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Concerning We Should Think of Saying That There Are Not Three Gods to Ablabius” in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, trans. and ed. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 117.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ John Anthony McGuckin, “Introduction” in *On the Unity of Christ* by Cyril of Alexandria, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 29.

still a worthwhile aim.⁵⁹ In many of our churches, we focus on the lived experience and dilute or dispense with theology—the result is those we teach are not grounded in truth. In Cyril’s closing words, “we are to define the doctrine of faith correctly and without error ... [so] we shall not be carried away from the right path and will not abandon the royal road.”⁶⁰

In many ways, much of the turbulence, arguments, and negotiations surrounding the controversies of the Patristic period reflect this principle of division. Whether it was Athanasius challenging the Arians, Cyril against the Nestorians, or the myriad of other issues which arose, the crux of the argument was not merely terminology or even imperial or ecclesiastical power but rather the theology of the true faith. The key element in these early heresies was discontinuity with Scripture and what the Church believed; in response, the Church sought to show continuity with the Old Testament, the New Testament, and apostolic tradition.⁶¹ From their responses, it is evident the Church Fathers understood the Old Testament as revealed truth and read the Scriptures in light of the overall message of the Bible—Christ. They coined the phrase, “rule of faith” to describe the “totality of what the Bible teaches and what the Church has said about the Bible.”⁶² Irenaeus charges the Gnostics with “weaving ropes of sand” in their attempt to explain ambiguous biblical passages, using sources other than Scripture, or finding “anything ... in the Scriptures which they can adopt and accommodate to their baseless speculations.”⁶³ Modern evangelicals tend to start with ourselves and seek how God relates to us.

⁵⁹ McGuckin, 19.

⁶⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, 133.

⁶¹ Fairbairn, Lecture 6: “Early Heresies and Christian Identity,” CH 501: The Church to the Reformation.

⁶² Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 112.

⁶³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book II X.1, Book I I.3.

In light of the “rule of faith”, the Church Fathers “started with God, and especially with Christ, and asked how we participate in Christ.”⁶⁴

The heresies faced by the Church in the first centuries of its existence have not disappeared, though we may not call the beliefs the same names. “Old heresies and arguments against Christianity have a habit of reappearing long after they have been thought dead” and are often not always recognized, even in the Church.⁶⁵ Or, as Timothy Tennent observes, each generation must face its own heresies.⁶⁶ We, too, must contend for the true faith and not let vain arguments and endless debate draw us away from the critical importance of affirming—and teaching—the central truths of the doctrine of the incarnation and the downward movement of God the Son, Jesus Christ, upon which all else rests.

In the second century, Gnosticism and Marcionism were two great heresies that pushed the early Church Fathers to trace and defend the relationship of the Mosaic law and the Gospel, demonstrating the One True God and his pursuit of his people.⁶⁷ During this crucial time and in the centuries that followed, the Church continued to wrestle with defining the tenets of the faith, the doctrines of Christianity we hold fast today. As Robert Louis Wilken explains, one reason is that Christians, unlike the Greeks and Romans, affirm that certain things are true. Christianity is not a matter of ritual only, nor is God one of many.⁶⁸ Neither is he a lesser God. Christians, then

⁶⁴ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 115.

⁶⁵ I. Howard Marshall, Foreword in *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* by Andreas J. Kostenberger and Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 11.

⁶⁶ Timothy J. Tennant, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 108.

⁶⁷ Although Marcionism can be considered a subset of Gnosticism, for the purposes of this paper it will be discussed in a separate section.

⁶⁸ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 45.

and now, not only believe *in* God but also that he *is* the one true God, the Creator of the world, and Christ Jesus is the Son of God who rose from the dead. “Christian teaching does not lend itself to every possible opinion; it imposes limits that cannot be formulated in advance but become evident over time.”⁶⁹ The conflict over Gnosticism and Marcionism showed that some differences could not be tolerated despite the views of some modern scholars.⁷⁰ In the same way, the conflicts over Arianism and Nestorianism forced the Church to define the person of Christ as indivisible and both fully God and fully man.

Gnosticism: The Kingdom Inside You (2nd Century)

During the second century, various religious movements known collectively as Gnosticism arose. The term Gnosticism is notoriously difficult to define, often used to refer to a family of religious doctrines and myths that flourished during the late first century and second century.⁷¹ Based ontologically in part on the “downward view of the divine” and with the underlying storyline of original perfection, fall, and return, one can identify certain hallmarks of this heresy that began in the early centuries of the Church and continues its influence today.⁷²

Though there were a number of disparate groups and no central theological system, the common beliefs centered on the supposition that creation is the result of an evil, ignorant creator and salvation is a “process in the course of which believers receive the knowledge of their divine origin so that they are enabled to return to the realm of light” after being freed from the physical

⁶⁹ Wilken, 46.

⁷⁰ For example, see multiple works by Bart Ehrman or Elaine Pagels, both contemporary New Testament scholars and disciples of Walter Bauer, an early twentieth-century German theologian.

⁷¹ Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 328.

⁷² Nicholas Perrin, “The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of Gnosticism,” The Cooley Center Lectures, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, 2014.

world, particularly the physical body.⁷³ Almost all claimed a secret knowledge (*gnosis*) received from the Apostles to whom it was revealed, knowledge which provided the capability to free the spiritual element trapped in prison of the human body and return to the spiritual world or aeon from which it originally came.⁷⁴ In *The Gospel of Thomas*, perhaps the best-known of the Gnostic writings, we read: “Blessed are the solitary and elect, for you will find the kingdom. For you are from it, and to it you will return.”⁷⁵

After writing about the major views of various strands of Gnosticism and prior to tackling some of the lesser sects, Irenaeus remarks that “a multitude of Gnostics have sprung up and have been manifested like mushrooms growing out of the ground.”⁷⁶ Although there are differences in their mythology or practice, most can be characterized by a collection of intertwined beliefs, which are defined below.⁷⁷

Creation: The creator of the material world we inhabit is not the one true God but the Demiurge, a sort of mid-level being who created everything outside of the Pleroma.⁷⁸ Ptolemy wrote that the creator was an intermediate god, the “craftsman and maker of the universe or world and of the things within it.”⁷⁹ The Gnostics saw the world as not good; therefore the

⁷³ McGrath, *Heresy*, 118-119.

⁷⁴ Davis, 328: See also Fairbairn, PowerPoint 3: “Gnosticism and Christian Fault Lines,” CT 760: Readings in Christian Thought—Patristic Theology.

⁷⁵ “The Coptic Gospel of Thomas,” 3, in *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament*, Bart D. Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 20.

⁷⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1, XXIX.1.

⁷⁷ Based in part on Dr. Nicholas Perrin’s lectures from The Cooley Center Lectures, “The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of Gnosticism,” 2014.

⁷⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book I V.2.

⁷⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 205.

supreme god could not and would not have created such a world in which evil abounds. The gnostic work *Origin of the World* seeks to explain their view of creation beginning with the precipitating factor of chaos—“nothing existed prior to chaos.”⁸⁰ *The Secret Book of John* explains the myth of creation by the “malformed and imperfect” God of the Bible and how to escape.⁸¹

Spiritual/Physical Dualism: With few exceptions, the Gnostic readings reflect the “sharp spiritual/physical dualism” central to Gnosticism.⁸² With its roots in Platonic philosophy, the body is despised and separate from that which is spiritual. Their understanding of the physical body is extremely negative, particularly regarding sex, which is described as evil even within the bounds of marriage. In *The Acts of Thecla*, Paul preaches his message of chastity with “you must fear the one and only God and live a chaste life.”⁸³ Thecla renounces her marriage vows, heeding the charge that “blessed are those who have a full understanding of Jesus Christ, for they will be in the light.”⁸⁴ In language somewhat prurient and coarse, other Gnostic writings extol a life of chastity and warn of the evils of any sexual activity, calling sexual intercourse in marriage “the repugnant act.”⁸⁵

Mix of Asceticism and Anti-Nomianism: Since Gnostics taught that the body was immaterial, there was a “mix of asceticism and anti-nomianism,” either beating up the body or

⁸⁰ Ehrman, 307.

⁸¹ Ibid., 297.

⁸² Perrin, Cooley Center Lectures.

⁸³ Ehrman, 115.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 97.

pursuing any behavior.⁸⁶ Perhaps some of the proto-Orthodox works, such as *The Didache*, were a response to the lawless and licentious behavior of the Gnostics. For example, the *Letter of Barnabas* includes an instruction not to engage in sexual immorality, just one of a list of straightforward instructions for walking diligently in the “path of light.”⁸⁷

Secret Knowledge: The Gnostic writings speak of secret knowledge, a pervasive idea in Gnosticism. Only certain chosen ones receive and can understand these special revelations which would become “the basis for the ‘true’ understanding of the religion that the Gnostics set forth.”⁸⁸ *The Gospel of Thomas* begins: “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke ... ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.’”⁸⁹ The contrast between those who can understand and those who cannot is a main theme in the Gnostic work *The Gospel of Philip*.⁹⁰ The proto-Orthodox *Epistle of the Apostles* used the Gnostic’s love of post-resurrection dialogues and “turned it against them.”⁹¹

Salvation from Within: Salvation comes from within, by self-knowledge, and by being enlightened. Only the spiritual part of us can be saved. Jesus’ secret sayings in *The Gospel of Thomas* illuminate the Gnostic belief in self-actualization and the solitary nature of the spiritual. “The kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known.”⁹² And in verse 70, we read “If you bring forth what is within you,

⁸⁶ Perrin, Cooley Center Lectures.

⁸⁷ Ehrman, 234.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁹¹ Ibid., 73.

⁹² Ibid., 20.

what you bring forth will save you.”⁹³ Christianity is not solitary, nor is salvation accomplished on one’s own. Unlike the Gnostics, we know we cannot save ourselves by rising up to God.

Jesus Was Not Ontologically God: Among other heretical teachings, the Gnostics believed Jesus was adopted and/or only pretended to be human.⁹⁴ He was divine, but a lesser god of sorts, though the descriptions vary in the Gnostic writings. “[T]hey deny that He assumed anything material [into His nature], since indeed matter is incapable of salvation. They further hold that the consummation of all things will take place when all that is spiritual has been formed and perfected by *Gnosis* (knowledge).”⁹⁵ In *The Treatise on the Resurrection*, we read “The Savior swallowed up death He transformed [himself] into an imperishable Aeon and raised himself up ... and gave us the way of our immortality.”⁹⁶ In *The Gospel of Peter*, Jesus was crucified “but he was silent, as if he had no pain,” implying that he was not flesh but only spirit.⁹⁷ In *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, an apologetic against the proto-Orthodox, the writer called the primal Savior laughs at the lack of perception of those “born blind. ... That which was released was my incorporeal body. But I am the intellectual spirit filled with light.”⁹⁸ Since the body is either evil or immaterial, Jesus was not raised from the dead, nor will we be as believers.

Valentinus, founder of the most dominant form of Gnosticism the early Church faced, sought to use Gnostic ideals to bolster Christianity’s appeal to the contemporary culture and give

⁹³ Ehrman, 25.

⁹⁴ Perrin, Cooley Center Lectures.

⁹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book I VI.1.

⁹⁶ Ehrman, 208; This document is also known as *The Letter to Rheginos*.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 81; Note that the term *proto-Orthodox* is the term used by Ehrman and other contemporary scholars to refer to the group of Orthodox Christians who, in their view, “won” the battle for ascendancy in the early Church, thus writing history as we know it.

it more depth, creating a “deeper, more spiritual version of Christianity”—a type of Gnosticism that was palatable to early Christians.⁹⁹ Selective in their use of Scripture, the Gnostics reshaped the metanarrative of the Bible. In the words of Irenaeus, they “gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures and weave ropes of sand.”¹⁰⁰ Irenaeus’s criticism is this: they “disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth.”¹⁰¹

When a religion or a worldview differs from the Bible on everything, no one would confuse it with Christianity. It is difficult to discover the source of the worldview when the same phrases and concepts are used, but with different meanings behind them. Because of the verbal similarities to Christian terms in the Gnostic teachings, Irenaeus was deeply concerned about Valentinus’s followers interpreting Scripture according to their own beliefs and turning Christianity into Gnosticism.¹⁰² Bart Ehrman states *The Gospel of Truth* is a “moving expression of Gnostic joy in experiencing enlightenment,” and tells how those who receive the revealed truth of saving knowledge (*gnosis*) brought by Jesus Christ can emerge from the fog and illusions regarding the Father to understand who they really are and be united with the Father.¹⁰³

Gnosticism, “an existential commitment to freedom and self-realization,” leads to an experience of Jesus defined on one’s own terms.¹⁰⁴ Tertullian’s sketch of the Valentinians’

⁹⁹ McGrath, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book I VIII.1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, XXIV:6.

¹⁰² Donald Fairbairn, Lectures and Notes, CT760: Readings in Christian Thought—Gnosticism, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Charlotte, Fall 2017.

¹⁰³ Ehrman, 45-46.

¹⁰⁴ Perrin, The Cooley Center Lectures.

pursuit of something new and different could describe some Christians today, particularly the dynamic present in some small groups where opinions are valued more than the Scriptures. Tertullian describes the search for novelty by labeling such diversity of thought as the presumption of a revelation or a spiritual gift. “Most of them are in a divided state, being ready to say (and that sincerely) of certain points of their belief ... ‘I take this in a different sense.’”¹⁰⁵

As orthodox Christians, we stand on Scripture as God’s revealed Word, which serves as a narrative of his relentless pursuit of each of us created in his image and for his glory. Unlike the Gnostics, Christians know that The True Light is not within us; the search for the light or salvation is futile if one looks inward. Jesus Christ is God revealed in human flesh, the “true light, which gives light to everyone.”¹⁰⁶ The good news is the Son “came down” into *our* world. He is the “radiance of the glory of God and the exact representation of his nature,” so we can know what God is like.¹⁰⁷ During this period, the Church drew the battle lines on key truths: the unity of God with no division into good and evil gods, the unity of Christ with no division between the Logos/Christ and the man Jesus, and the reality of human choices.¹⁰⁸

Jesus’s “secret sayings” in *The Gospel of Thomas* underscore the need to discover what is within: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”¹⁰⁹ With the promise of self-salvation, Thomas’s Jesus is comfortable and requires nothing of us. This is

¹⁰⁵ Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* IV.6662-6663.

¹⁰⁶ John 1:9.

¹⁰⁷ Hebrew 1:3.

¹⁰⁸ Fairbairn, PowerPoint 2: “Early Heresies and Christian Identity”, CT760: Readings in Christian Thought—Gnosticism.

¹⁰⁹ “The Coptic Gospel of Thomas,” 3, in *Lost Scriptures*, Ehrman, 70.

radically different from the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament in which he requires our very selves, for the true God revealed by Christ is “a personal God and has ... initiated a kind of relationship with humanity that obliges [us] to respond with [our] lives.”¹¹⁰ The Gnostic influences that have seeped into our Christian culture are troubling with a subtle, though significant, shift toward defining Christianity for one’s self. Orthodoxy no longer matters; instead the common belief often appears to be “Jesus is who I want him to be” and “the Bible says what I want it to say.” As leaders and teachers, we must be intentional in helping the next generations develop their own commitment to the primacy of Scripture as the basis for faith, not emotion, experience, or the desire for something more.

Marcionism: The Separation of Law and Gospel (2nd Century)

“Marcion’s special and principal work is the separation of the law and the gospel.”¹¹¹ In the second century, Tertullian wrote his five-book polemical attack on Marcion and his teachings, which by that time had spread from Rome and penetrated North Africa. Marcion took literally Paul’s claim that Christians were free from the bondage of the Mosaic law and repudiated the Old Testament, “unhitching” it from the New Testament, which he excised to produce his own version. For Marcion, like the Gnostics, the god of the Old Testament was a lesser god, an imperfect creator of a fallen world with no connection to the God of the New Testament revealed by Jesus Christ who proclaimed a gospel of mercy, love, and compassion. Often described as the Church’s “first heretic,” Marcion declared a radical separation between

¹¹⁰ Nicholas Perrin, *Lost in Transmission? What We Can Know about the Words of Jesus*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 6.

¹¹¹ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, I, XIX.

the law and the Gospel and developed his own redacted version of the New Testament.¹¹²

Marcionism shared some Gnostic ideas, though his teachings may best be described as a subset of Gnosticism with its dualistic understanding of a lesser creator God and a highly ascetic view towards anything physical.¹¹³

From all accounts, Marcion was a brilliant administrator and organizer. After his excommunication by the Church in Rome in 144 AD, he established a network of Marcionite churches throughout the empire, including North Africa. These groups followed his teachings, which included the sharp distinction between God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament—the Christian gospel was one of love, with no wrath at all to be satisfied. As a result, Marcion rejected the authority of the Old Testament with what he saw as its capricious, despotic, and cruel god (the Demiurge) while the supreme God of love was found in the New Testament. Jesus came to reveal this God of love and to overthrow the reign of the Demiurge.¹¹⁴

Thus, for Marcion, it was impossible for Jesus to be God the Son. He was the emissary of the true Supreme God, the Father, and materialized as a man preaching, teaching, and possessing a phantom body while merely appearing to be a man—theology in line with Docetism. The true God overcame and won back the world with the passion and death of Jesus, though it took place in this phantom body and, therefore, was not real. Marcion's revulsion toward the body led to a severe morality and asceticism along with the belief that God could not possibly become a man,

¹¹² Michael J. Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 216.

¹¹³ Donald Fairbairn, Class Lectures and Handouts, CH/TH 639: Early Latin North African Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Hamilton, Summer Intensive 2018.

¹¹⁴ In Platonic philosophy, the Demiurge was the creator of the world, a lower god. Gnosticism adopted this basic theology and considered this subordinate heavenly being as the controller of the material world and antagonistic to the spiritual realm.

much less suffer death or be resurrected.¹¹⁵ Like the Gnostics, Marcion believed only the soul was important.¹¹⁶

Since Marcion could not accept the connection of the Christian Gospel to the Law, the continuity between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, he created his own list of acceptable books. His highly edited version of the Bible contained only an expurgated edition of Gospel of Luke and ten Pauline letters in this order: Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans (chs. 1-14 only), 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians (called “Laodiceans”), Colossians, Philippians, Philemon. He redacted references to Old Testament passages and restated what he believed Paul must have intended in the epistles he included in his canon.¹¹⁷

Marcion’s one book, the *Antitheses*, survives in fragments contained in his opponents’ works. The title of the work reflects his dualism and his central theological conviction: the Christian gospel of Jesus Christ contradicts the Old Testament. Opinion is divided among scholars regarding Marcion’s influence on the development of the New Testament canon. Whether or not his teachings prompted the resolution of the canon, Marcion’s influence continued for a century after his death in AD 160 in Asia Minor. Angela Tilby describes Marcion in this way:

What Marcion couldn’t bear was the note of judgment that went along with the preaching of the Christian message, the warnings that came with the teaching of the law, the call to obedience and the threat of hell. For Marcion, the picture of God given in Exodus 20:18-20, a God whose presence is manifest in thunder and lightning and smoke on the mountain, was simply unbelievable. A God who makes his people tremble with fear, a God with whom they are afraid to communicate, could not be the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, passages like this seemed to him to cast doubt on the central

¹¹⁵ Fairbairn, Class Lectures and Handouts, CH/TH 639: Early Latin North African Christianity; The description of Marcion’s beliefs is adapted from Dr. Fairbairn’s class lectures and notes.

¹¹⁶ In Book III of *Against Heresies*, Tertullian strongly asserts the physical death and resurrection of Christ.

¹¹⁷ Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89-92; Chadwick notes that the Pauline letters Marcion received would not include Hebrew or the Pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus.

claim of the gospel. As he saw it, the Christianity of his day needed purging so that the pure gospel could be received in all its radical simplicity and appeal to the heart.¹¹⁸

As one of the most notable heretics of the early Church, Marcion was widely condemned by both Greek and Latin Orthodox opponents. However, none of his critics were more scathing than Tertullian in his work *Against Marcion*, the first volume of five written c. 197-200, fifty years after Marcion's truncated New Testament arrived in North Africa.¹¹⁹ These five volumes represent an estimated twenty percent of the extant work of Tertullian.¹²⁰ In Books 1 and 2, Tertullian attacks Marcion's proposed Superior God and lesser creator with well-reasoned and articulated arguments such as the following examples:¹²¹

- “What new god is there, except a false one?”
- “For indeed as the Creator of all things, He was from the beginning discovered equally with them”
- “Eternity has no time. . . . God, moreover, is as independent of beginning and end as He is of time, which is only the arbiter and measurer of a beginning and an end.”
- “But the Christian verity has distinctly declared this principle, ‘God is not, if He is not one’. . . . God is the great Supreme, existing in eternity, unbegotten, unmade, without beginning, without end.”

¹¹⁸ Angela Tilby, “Marcionism: Can Christians Dispense with the God of the Old Testament?,” in *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why It Matters What Christians Believe*, edited by Ben Quash and Michael Ward (Grand Rapids, MN: Baker Academic, 2007), 75.

¹¹⁹ Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 161-164. According to Oden, c. AD 207-208 Tertullian wrote the second edition of *Against Marcion*, containing books 1-3, and books 4-5 (3rd. ed.) c. AD 208-212.

¹²⁰ Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 50.

¹²¹ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* I.VIII., I.X., I.VIII., I.VIII., I.III.

Tertullian also asserts that Christ Jesus is the revealer of the Creator, and no other god, especially Marcion's god, could be the same.¹²² In Book III, he attacks Marcion's Docetism and defends the passion and resurrection of Christ; in Books IV and V, he analyzes Marcion's version of the Gospel of Luke and the Pauline letters. Tertullian saw his work not just as a "dispassionate record and discussion of his opponent's views, but as the argued demonstration of the coherence and integrity of the Christian truth."¹²³ In 1868, Peter Holmes, the translator of Tertullian's *Against Marcionism*, observed in his preface: "[This heresy of Marcionism] gave Tertullian his opportunity of proving the essential coherence of the Old and the New Testaments and ... the progressive nature of God's revelation as a whole."¹²⁴ Today, we have the opportunity to showcase the essential coherence of the Bible and the progressive revelation of the triune God as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. For as Holmes wrote in the nineteenth century, "If Marcionism is in the letter obscure, there is its spirit left in the church"¹²⁵

From the beginning, God's revelation, first through creation and then through his word, communicates his love for his people. Tertullian wrote, "From the beginning the knowledge of God is the dowry of the soul, one and the same amongst the Egyptians, and the Syrians, and the tribes of Pontus. For their souls call the God of the Jews their God."¹²⁶ Tertullian challenged the Marcionites to recognize that even in Pontus where their founder was born, what can be known

¹²² Tertullian, I.XIX.

¹²³ Lieu, 50.

¹²⁴ Peter Holmes, "Preface" to *Against Marcion, Books 1-5* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume III: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 270.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 269.

¹²⁶ Tertullian, I.10.

about God was plainly revealed since the creation of the world.¹²⁷ One cannot separate God the Father and God the Son, Jesus Christ, nor the Old Testament from the New Testament. “I and the Father are One.”¹²⁸

The apostle John in the first chapter of his gospel writes that the “Word” or *Logos* is the one through whom God made the universe. The writer of Hebrews confirms this with the following claim: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”¹²⁹ As Donald Fairbairn explains, the Greek speakers from throughout the ancient world would recognize the word *logos*, a word used by pagan philosophers and writers to refer to the “divine being by whom the supreme God communicated to the world.”¹³⁰ Not only was everything created through the Word—the *Logos*, the Son—but the Word was present with God before creation. The Word was God. “By using the word *logos*, John indicates that the second person of the Trinity is the one by whom God communicates to humanity. He is God’s communication par excellence, the last and greatest way God has spoken to us.”¹³¹

The fundamental conviction of the early Church is that the link between the testaments is Christ—he is the “fulfillment of the entire Old Testament hope,” and the promise of the divine Redeemer is revealed in increasing specificity throughout the Old Testament, pointing to the

¹²⁷ Romans 1:18-20.

¹²⁸ John 10:30.

¹²⁹ Hebrews 1: 1-2.

¹³⁰ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 133.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

New Covenant.¹³² Jesus is the “focal point from which all other stories are to be seen and on which all finally and decisively converge.”¹³³ It is our responsibility to know and proclaim the truth of the coherence of the entire Scriptures, the one true triune God existing in three Persons before the creation of the world, and the fullness of the Christian Gospel. While watering down the Gospel and creating a softer, gentler version of Christianity may be more palatable in our time, just as it was in the second century, the Truth is contained in the entirety of Scripture.

Arianism: The Created Christ (4th Century)

“Wherefore there was a time when He was not; for the Son is a creature and a work.”¹³⁴ This most famous of Arius’s statements around the Word of God reveals the main charge against him, his teaching that Christ was a created being and not the pre-existent, eternal Son of God. Most likely written by Athanasius, the Encyclical Letter was sent under Bishop Alexander’s name after the deposition of Arius around 320 or 321 and is one of the earliest documents in the Arian controversy, which erupted in North Africa and dominated much of the fourth century. Arius was condemned, the first of a series of long and arduous battles over the deity of the Son. Arius’s words denying the eternality of the Son, and therefore rejecting that God has always been a Father, are recounted here:

God was not always a Father, but there was a time when God was not a Father. The Word of God was not always, but originated from things that were not; for God that is, has made him that was not, of that which was not; wherefore there was a time when He was not; for the Son is a creature and a work. Neither is He like in essence to the Father; neither is He the true and natural Word of the Father; neither is He His true Wisdom; but He is one of the things made and created, and is called the Word and Wisdom by an

¹³² Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 121.

¹³³ McGrath, *Heresy*, 126.

¹³⁴ Athanasius, *The Deposition of Arius* 1.

abuse of terms, since He Himself originated by the proper Word of God, and by the Wisdom that is in God, by which God has made not only all other things but Him also.¹³⁵

Why did Alexander, Athanasius, and other presbyters react so violently to Arius's teaching? If Christ is not fully God, then salvation itself is threatened. One of the main line of arguments Athanasius used in defending the full deity of the Son is soteriological—if the Son of God is not truly God in the same sense as the Father, then salvation is impossible. If Christ were not God *and* human, then he could not bring man and God together. Salvation “would then ultimately be reduced to living a good moral life (Christian moralism) or else gaining some secret knowledge (Gnosticism) or merely having one's sins forgiven but being left in the same fallen and corrupt condition as before.”¹³⁶ “[Arius] regarded salvation as an upward movement of the soul to God, and he saw the Son as a figure between God and humanity who could thus help us in that ascent.”¹³⁷ If, as the Arians argued, Christ is a created being and not truly God as the Father is God, we cannot be saved by him nor does he reveal the Father to us—for “Christianity revolves around Jesus Christ as the real incarnation of God in human nature.”¹³⁸

Arius, a pupil of one of Origen's followers, arrived in Alexandria in the early fourth century. Set against the background of Platonism with its hierarchy or trinity of unequal gods, Origen's views greatly influenced Arius's thinking on the subordination of the Logos, or Word, to God. Christ is the first creation and therefore above all other creation, yet he is still a creation and subordinate to the Father. Arius regarded the Father and Son as two distinct and separate

¹³⁵ Athanasius, *The Deposition of Arius* 1.

¹³⁶ Olson, 170.

¹³⁷ Fairbairn and Reeves, Chapter 4.

¹³⁸ Olson, 171.

beings, contrary to Scripture.¹³⁹ For example, in Jesus's high priestly prayer, he prays "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."¹⁴⁰

At this time, as Fairbairn and Reeves explain, the issue was not centered on whether the Father is unbegotten and the Son begotten. Most understood the Son to be begotten from the Father somehow; otherwise the Bible would not have called him "Son":

The issue was not even whether the Son was begotten before the universe was created, since even Arius asserted that the Son was begotten "before all ages." The issue was whether there was once when there was no Son, and therefore whether the Son was eternal or not. Arius clearly believed that there *was* once when there was no Son (not quite "a time when there was no Son," since this was before time, but nevertheless the Son "was not before he was begotten"). If there was once when the Son was not, then the Son was a creature. He goes below the hard line separating God from all that he has made, not above the line. For Arius, "begotten" and "created" were synonymous, and the begotten/created one must somehow be after the one who begat/created him.¹⁴¹

The result of Arius's logic proclaimed the Son is a creature, even if created before time, and therefore not fully God. And, if the Son is not fully God, he cannot save us.

In defending the incarnation of the Word against Arianism, Athanasius wrote that the Logos or Christ took on a body capable of death and surrendered his body like ours "to death for all humanity, and offered it to the Father," inseparably linking the incarnation and the atonement. "This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was

¹³⁹ For an excellent explanation of Platonic and neo-Platonic thought and the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, particularly the confusion with similar terminology, see *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* by Donald Fairbairn and Ryan Reeves, forthcoming August 2019 and published by Baker Academic.

¹⁴⁰ John 17:21.

¹⁴¹ Fairbairn and Reeves, Chapter 4.

thereafter voided of its power for men.”¹⁴² What Christ did is dependent upon who he is; unless Christ is God, humanity could not have been redeemed.¹⁴³ Athanasius wrote of the connection between the atonement and the incarnation: “For by the sacrifice of His own body He did two things: He put an end to the law of death which barred our way; and He made a new beginning of life for us, by giving us the hope of resurrection. By man death has gained its power over men; by the Word made Man death has been destroyed and life raised up anew.”¹⁴⁴

The Arian controversy led to the Councils at Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) as well as the articulation of the doctrine of the Son. The Creed developed at Nicaea declared the Son is begotten, not made. “The Son is true God, not ‘God’ by way of a courtesy title. Those who believe that the Father preexisted before the Son or that the Son came into existence from nothing or is subject to change were anathematized.”¹⁴⁵ The results of the Council of Nicaea of 325 clearly condemned Arius’s teaching that denied the Son’s deity and named his status as a creature. The Nicene-Constantinople Creed of 381 declared the Son *homoousios*, one substance with the Father: “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father”¹⁴⁶ This declaration pronounced the full deity of the Son and his oneness with the Father, and focused critical attention on refuting Arius as well as conveying the theology of the Son. The creeds that came out of these two councils carefully articulated that

¹⁴² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2.8.

¹⁴³ McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 290.

¹⁴⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2.10.

¹⁴⁵ Rusch, 15.

¹⁴⁶ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this further, there were factions in the fourth-century (homoousians, homoiousians, homoians, and anomoians) that debated Christ's status. The use of Latin and Greek terms which appeared to have similar meanings added to the confusion and division. For a treatment of these events, consult *The Story of Creeds and Confessions* by Fairbairn and Reeves and *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787)* by Leo Donald Davis.

the Son is of the same substance as the Father, and these creeds are ones to which Christians adhere today. (For the text of both creeds, see Appendix I.)

The bitter Arian controversy continued through the fourth century with imperial power thrown in on both sides, depending on which side had the imperial favor at any given time.¹⁴⁷ At the beginning of the fifth century, there were still many churches throughout the empire that did not grant that the Son was *homoousios* with the Father.¹⁴⁸ The Arians' focus was on the Son's place in creation and his status as a created being. Athanasius "begins with the firm conviction that the Word became flesh to redeem the human race, to make men godlike."¹⁴⁹

In *Against the Arians*, Athanasius writes:

For if, being a creature, He [the Word] had become man, man had remained just what he was, not joined to God; for how had a work been joined to the Creation by a work? Or what succor had come from like to like, when one as well as other need it? And how, were the Word a creature, had He power to undo God's sentence, and to remit sin, whereas it is written in the Prophets that this is God's doing? For who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by transgression?¹⁵⁰

It is worthwhile to note that in the period following the Council of Nicaea, the continuing struggle against Arianism in its varying forms led to recognition that a similar theological formulation of the deity of the Spirit and his relation to God the Father was necessary. Athanasius had refuted successfully Arius's position on the Son as a created being but not his logic. This question of the deity and equality of the Son arose again in relation to the Holy Spirit and was addressed in the Council at Constantinople in 381 as well as reflected in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed. Just as the Son must be fully God to save us, so must the Holy Spirit be

¹⁴⁷ Donald Fairbairn, Class Lectures, CH/TH 668: The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Charlotte, Spring 2018.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Davis, 89.

¹⁵⁰ Athanasius, *Against the Arians* II.67.

just as fully God as the Son in order to sanctify us.¹⁵¹ In his work, the Holy Spirit points to the Son and thus to the Father showing us the relationship between and among the three persons of the Trinity and causes us to share in that fellowship.

The uncertainty about the Son's status as fully God is one that we face in our churches today. A recent poll of evangelical Christians in the US by a well-known research group showed that most were confused about the person of Christ. In the summary report, the following disturbing statistics were reported:

Strangely, while most evangelicals strongly believe in justification by faith alone, they are confused about the person of Jesus Christ. On one hand, virtually all evangelicals express support for Trinitarian doctrine. Yet at the same time, most agree that Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God, which was a view espoused by the ancient heretic Arius.¹⁵²

This failure to understand who Christ is and why he must be fully God to save us is compounded by the belief that man can rise up to God. There is a critical need for teaching of Christology and the doctrine of the person of Christ. With a focus on experience, we have neglected theological education in the basic tenets of the Christian faith. As teachers and leaders, it is time to rectify our mistakes and develop fresh ways to teach the core tenets of the faith that those who have gone before us fought so desperately to defend.

Nestorianism: The Two Persons

In the late fourth century and early fifth centuries, Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia (near Tarsus), and Nestorius, a Syrian monk who became bishop of Constantinople in 428, were the center of the controversy over the two natures of Christ. Nestorius was a disciple of Theodore

¹⁵¹ Fairbairn, Class Lectures, CH/TH 668: The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies.

¹⁵² "Religious belief is a matter of opinion, it is not about objective truth", a survey conducted by LifeWay Research and Ligonier Ministries, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/october/what-do-christians-believe-ligonier-state-theology-heresy.html>, accessed March 15, 2019.

and most scholars view his theology as an extension of Theodore's teachings.¹⁵³ However, most of Nestorius's works deal with "distinction between Christ's divine and human natures and their union in the common *prosopon*, or person."¹⁵⁴

With the background of Apollinarianism that was rejected at Constantinople (381), and maintained the "[d]ivine Logos functioned as the mind of Christ who possessed a sentient human body," Theodore and Nestorius, along with Diodore, developed a theology to accommodate two persons in the one "Christ."¹⁵⁵ In Nestorian terms, in Christ there were two concrete beings joined in one undivided appearance. Thus, the Logos performs those actions done by the divine while appearing as a man. Again, as in the fourth century, part of the problem was the use of terms and language. When Nestorius spoke of two *physeis* (persons) and one *prosopon* (nature) for Christ, it sounds orthodox. However, in looking at their use of the words, it is clear he meant "two persons, the Logos and the assumed man, who *appear* as one external presentation because one doesn't actually see the Logos; one sees only the man."¹⁵⁶ Fairbairn and Reeves explain that Nestorius and his associates argued the following:

The word "Christ" was something of a corporate term that could encompass both the Logos and the assumed man, and this understanding of the word "Christ" enabled them to say that Christ is both divine and human. The Logos is divine, and the man is human, and since "Christ" is the man indwelt by the Logos, "Christ" is both divine and human. Most of the time, though, they used the word "Christ" to refer to the assumed man, Jesus.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Theodorean Christology separated the Logos (Christ) from suffering. He was a "graced man" who led the way for us, (Fairbairn, CH/TH 668: The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies).

¹⁵⁴ Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, 53.

¹⁵⁵ Davis, 327.

¹⁵⁶ Fairbairn and Reeves, Chapter 5.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

This articulated an understanding in which Jesus is a man whom the Logos indwelt, granting him grace, aid, and cooperation in a way somewhat similar to the way the Holy Spirit does as he indwells a believer.¹⁵⁸ Christ was not, therefore, one indivisible person with two natures: the assumed man was the personal subject.¹⁵⁹

In the early twentieth century, the common scholarly approach to Nestorius was to regard his condemnation to be a result of political forces rather than his doctrine.¹⁶⁰ More recent views of Nestorius's teaching confirm the ancient Church's judgment that his Christology was flawed.¹⁶¹ Once again, part of the reason for the confusion is the inconsistent use of the terms for person and nature. However, according to Donald Fairbairn, there is evidence that Nestorius used the word *prosopon* in the sense of an external presentation, not as a synonym for person:

The Logos is divine, and the man is human, and since "Christ" is the man indwelt by the Logos, "Christ" is both divine and human. Most of the time, though, they used the word "Christ" to refer to the assumed man, Jesus. Thus, the picture that emerged from their thought was that of Christ as a uniquely graced man, a man who received grace from the indwelling Logos in a greater way than we do from the indwelling Holy Spirit. Christ, the man, had the task of rising up to God with the help of the indwelling Logos, and in a similar but not identical way, we have the task of rising up to God with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Thus, Christ is much more similar to us than he is different. He is not God the Son who has come down to save us, but rather he is a divinely-indwelt man who can lead us up to God.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Fairbairn and Reeves, Chapter 5.

¹⁵⁹ Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, 59.

¹⁶⁰ Donald Fairbairn in "Nestorius" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 584-585.

¹⁶¹ At the Council in Ephesus in AD431, Nestorius was exiled. The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) affirmed that in Jesus Christ there are two distinct natures in one person and that in the one person of Christ they were hypostatically united "unconfusedly, inconvertibly, indivisibly, inseparably", or "without confusion, change division or separation". See Appendix II for a summary of the Councils of the fourth-seventh centuries showing the development of the doctrine of Christ.

¹⁶² Fairbairn and Reeves, Chapter 5.

The key here is not that he comes down to us for our salvation but that Christ could inspire us and lead us to God. As a “uniquely graced man,” God the Logos gives the assumed man the power to advance to a higher state.¹⁶³

One of the flash points in Nestorius’s bishopric was over his rejection of the title *Theotokos* (God-bearer) for Mary as the Mother of God. In denying this title, Nestorius was declaring her Son to not be God. In his first Sermon against the *Theotokos*, Nestorius writes:

Our nature, having been put on by Christ like a garment, intervenes on our behalf, being entirely free from all sin and contending by appeal to its blameless origin, just as the Adam who was formed earlier brought punishment upon his race by reason of his sin. . . . The third day burial belonged to this man, not to the deity. His feet were fastened down by the nails, he is the one whom the Holy Spirit formed in the womb. It was about this flesh that the Lord said to the Jews, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). Am I the only one who calls Christ “two-fold”?¹⁶⁴

Because Nestorius thought it was impossible for God to suffer, Christ must be two persons—the man who could suffer with the Logos in the background. In Cyril’s argument addressing this, he wrote, “[T]hey are denying that Christ is really God and Son.”¹⁶⁵

Nestorius’s chief opponent was Cyril of Alexandria, Patriarch of Alexandria. What Nestorius “regarded as the worst theological excess—the indiscriminate ascription of both divine and human attributes and characteristics to the one person—Cyril regarded as the quintessential truth revealed by the mystery of incarnation, and the very principle whereby the human race was redeemed.”¹⁶⁶ For Cyril, salvation was God giving us himself by granting us the very fellowship

¹⁶³ Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ Richard A. Norris, ed., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 99.

¹⁶⁵ Cyril, *On the Unity of Christ*, 65.

¹⁶⁶ McGuckin, Introduction to *On the Unity of Christ*, Cyril of Alexandria, 20.

he has within himself.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, in order to give himself to us, God himself must enter our human condition fully. It was God the Son who suffered, for we cannot go to God; he must come to us.

Without actually rejecting Nestorius's view of God's impassibility, Cyril does not hesitate to say that God has suffered. His view is that the personal subject of Christ is the Logos, not the man.¹⁶⁸ In his commentary on John 1:13, Cyril writes of God sharing his own fellowship with us.

For when he had said that *authority was given to them* from him who is by nature Son, to become *sons of God*, and had hereby first introduced that which is of adoption and grace, he can afterwards add without danger [of misunderstanding] that they *were begotten of God*; that he might show the greatness of the grace which was conferred on them, gathering as it were into natural fellowship those who were alien from God the Father, and raising up the slaves to the nobility of their Lord, on account of his warm love towards them."¹⁶⁹

For us to be made sons, Cyril maintained the unity of Christ must be upheld. Salvation is a gift. Christ is a son by nature; we are sons and daughters by grace.¹⁷⁰ The starting point for Cyril is Christ, the natural Son.

The problems the early Church faced echo through our times with the same question: Is Christ really both God and Son? It is a question of salvation, not philosophical arguments, for if Jesus Christ is not both God and Son, he cannot save us.¹⁷¹ One could argue that evangelicals are

¹⁶⁷ Fairbairn, Presentation 3: "Christological Controversy," CH/TH 668: The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 1:13; Note the italics are used to indicate where Scripture is quoted.

¹⁷⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, 94-95.

¹⁷¹ Donald Fairbairn, "The One Person Who Is Jesus Christ: The Patristic Perspective" in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, edited by Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 106.

“functional Nestorians” because there is a difference when saying the Logos suffered in his flesh through the humanity he took upon himself.¹⁷² But the person who suffered is the one and the same preincarnate Christ; they are the same person.¹⁷³ Even mature believers cannot articulate who really died on the cross—and if God himself suffered. Many think that it was the human side of Christ who died, not the divine, therefore splitting Christ into two persons much as the Nestorians did. Once again, we see the need to bolster our teaching of theology in our churches, particularly Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Cyril’s concern for “correlating a highly intellectual theology with the lived experience of the ordinary Christian” is still a worthwhile aim.¹⁷⁴ In Cyril’s closing words, “we are to define the doctrine of faith correctly and without error ... [so] we shall not be carried away from the right path and will not abandon the royal road.”¹⁷⁵ We, too, must contend for the true faith and not let vain arguments and endless debate draw us away from the critical importance of affirming the central truths of the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ, upon which all else rests.

The Upward Sweep of Salvation

In the great story of redemption and restoration, all redemptive arrows point downward, and this is the primary message of this paper.¹⁷⁶ We are separated from God by our sin, and we cannot save ourselves. Nor does God throw us a lifeline so we can climb up to him. Since we

¹⁷² Fairbairn, Presentation 3: “Christological Controversy,” CH/TH 668: The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Lionel Wickham, “Introduction” in *On God and Christ* by St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Translation and Introduction by Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham Popular Patristics Series. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002.

¹⁷⁵ Cyril, *On the Unity of Christ*, 133.

¹⁷⁶ Fairbairn, Lecture, CH/TH669: Soteriology in Christian History, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Charlotte. Spring 2017.

cannot rise up to God, God must come down to us, and he did so in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son who, by his incarnation, death, and resurrection, has restored us into the fellowship of the Trinity. We receive the Son at salvation; the benefits flow from him, not from something we do. We are saved by grace through faith and not of ourselves.¹⁷⁷ The Holy Spirit enters us when we place our faith in the person of Christ and unites us to Christ, restoring us to fellowship as adopted sons and daughters. We are reconciled, redeemed, forgiven, sealed, adopted in the Beloved.¹⁷⁸

There is more to salvation than just forgiveness. God's downward movement enables our upward movement; God the Son comes down to us to bring us into the fellowship of the Father and the Son. Instead of two separate acts, Torrance describes the downward and upward sweep as a two-fold movement:

Within this one supreme act of grace, in which God assumes human beings into oneness with his own divine being, and maintains it in that oneness, there is a twofold movement. There is first the act of divine condescension and humiliation, in which the Son mercifully took upon himself our alienated humanity, in order to assume our alien and creaturely human being into unity with himself. But this act of humiliation is also an act of grace, elevating and exalting our poor human being into healing communion with the life of God, and into sanctification in the divine holiness. These are not two acts, but one act, which compiles its "downward" movement of grace in an "upward" movement of sanctification ... for the coming of God down to man is as such the gathering of man into fellowship and reconciliation with God.¹⁷⁹

The incarnation is the source of our salvation.¹⁸⁰ Instead of being slaves, we "become adopted sons and daughters of God, sharing by grace in the fellowship the Son has with the Father by

¹⁷⁷ Eph.2:8-9.

¹⁷⁸ Eph. 1:8-9.

¹⁷⁹ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 207.

¹⁸⁰ Fairbairn, Lecture, CH/TH669: Soteriology in Christian History.

nature.”¹⁸¹ Cyril of Alexandria is instructive in this relational idea of adoption, particularly the important difference between Christ being the True Son by nature and our being sons by adoption:

The concept of sonship means this when applied to one who is so naturally [that is, when applied to Christ], but the matter is otherwise with those who are sons by adoption. For since Christ is not a son in this manner [by adoption], he is therefore truly a Son, so that on account of this he may be distinguished from us, who are sons by adoption. For there would be sonship neither by adoption nor by likeness to God if he did not remain the true Son, to whose likeness our sonship is called and formed by a certain skill and grace.¹⁸²

The only one who has been in a relationship with the Father eternally is Christ, and those who believe in Christ are sons and daughters by adoption. “We are brought into the relationship through God’s action; it is conferred on us rather than being our birthright.”¹⁸³

A primarily relational view of adoption can be an unexpected way of thinking for many evangelicals. We are adopted as a daughter or son, a child in relationship. We are adopted, not for inheritance rights or for legal standing, but so we can call God *Father*.¹⁸⁴ We often declare God as the One who saves yet place an unconscious emphasis on the decision one makes to believe, as though our acceptance of Christ affects salvation. Personal decision, personal relationship, personal walk of faith—the vocabulary we use reveals the basis of our belief about a relationship made possible by the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross and his resurrection but, ultimately, only possible when we do something—even if what we do is “accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior.” Yes, our relationship with God is personal, we are saved from judgment by the work of Christ, and we are saved by faith, not works. But salvation is so much more. God

¹⁸¹ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 19.

¹⁸² Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus on the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity* 32. Quoted in Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 135, (Fairbairn’s translation).

¹⁸³ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 135.

¹⁸⁴ Fairbairn, Lecture, CH/TH669: Soteriology in Christian History.

is the One who saves us, not our decision. We do not—and cannot—save ourselves in any manner. And we are not only saved from judgment; we are restored into the fellowship of the Trinity.

In many evangelical traditions, salvation is legal, a change in our standing or position before God whereby we are forgiven of our sin. This deeply-rooted juridical understanding of salvation can be limited to seeing God the Father as the one before whom we stand condemned and the one who saves us by sending his Son to give his life as a substitute payment for our sins. Though true, the legal framework alone does not begin to capture the fullness of salvation, the Person of Jesus Christ, and our being brought into relationship with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. In John 17:31, Jesus promises in his high priestly prayer: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

In Paul’s use of Isaiah in Romans, Paul shows that the solution to man’s sinfulness is not juridical but redemption, where God makes a sinful people righteous through his righteousness, not by merely declaring them righteous.¹⁸⁵ The new covenant is marked by an “internal law, planted in the minds and written on the hearts of people, and brings with it necessary inner renewal that will make obedience possible.”¹⁸⁶ The role of the Holy Spirit is to accomplish salvation in us, not to help us accomplish our own salvation. Salvation restores us into the fellowship of the Trinity, into relationship with the Triune God. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God in the *already* now and look forward to the *not yet* when we will participate in that fellowship forever. Eternal life is not a future state where we live in bliss. Jesus told his

¹⁸⁵ Rollins Grams, Lecture: “The Human Condition in Romans 1-3,” NT/OT 594: Biblical Theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary–Charlotte, Fall 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 270; 1 Tim. 2:5.

disciples— eternal life starts now, “that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”¹⁸⁷

The Great Story

When Jesus stepped into human history, he announced the “climax of the long story of God’s redemptive work.”¹⁸⁸ The good news is that the kingdom of God has arrived. “God is about to act in love, wrath, and power by the intervention of his anointed king (Messiah) and by his Spirit to restore his reign over the whole world—all creation, all nations, all human life.”¹⁸⁹ Though primarily a historical narrative, these biblical stories are woven together, revealing God’s unfolding plan for redemption and the promise of the King who will rule forever.¹⁹⁰ From Genesis, when all creation was in harmony, through the after-effects of the fall, all redemptive arrows point to the Messiah who will redeem and restore, and who “delivers us from the domain of darkness, and transfers us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.”¹⁹¹ The almighty God, the Creator who spoke the world into existence, took on flesh and made “peace by the blood of his cross.”¹⁹² The Bible from beginning to end is the story of God’s great love for his people—“a love on the basis of which he promised to send a person through whom all the nations of the world might be blessed.”¹⁹³ This one person is Jesus Christ.

¹⁸⁷ John 17:3.

¹⁸⁸ Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 17.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹⁰ 2 Sam. 7:5-17.

¹⁹¹ Eph. 1:10.

¹⁹² Col. 1:19.

¹⁹³ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 129.

My profession is publishing, so I often think in those terms. When writing fiction or story-driven non-fiction, many elements combine to form a compelling narrative, including an absorbing plot, well-drawn characters, and a setting that draws the reader in and gives a sense of time and place. But the critical element of a good book is the throughline, the driving force of the story. Though there may be multiple throughlines, there is always one fundamental idea that pulls the reader from beginning to end, foreshadowing the conclusion. The reader anticipates a satisfying denouement, which usually is driven by the climax.

A second principle of a captivating story is to “propel your hero forward.” In the grand story of God’s mission to draw all people and all nations to himself, Jesus Christ is the hero, and the promise of the Messiah is woven throughout Scripture. The throughline is the mission of God to declare his glory, and Scripture repeatedly proclaims that all nations one day will worship the one true God, for “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”¹⁹⁴

From Genesis through Revelation, Scripture declares God’s Kingdom and proclaims his sovereignty, reign, and care for his creation and his people. With the incarnation, Jesus broke into human history and ushered in the Kingdom of God on earth. In Ephesians 1, Paul derives his words from the Old Testament, particularly Psalm 2 and Psalm 110, to showcase Jesus’s authority over all things, both in this age and the age to come.¹⁹⁵ Although the Kingdom has come, it is not fully realized and will not be until it is established on earth when Christ returns to reign forever.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Is. 40:5. See also Is. 42:6-8.

¹⁹⁵ Grams, Lecture: “He Is Our Peace: Christ’s Universal Rule and Mission in Ephesians,” NT/OT 594: Biblical Theology; See Eph. 1:17-23, Psalms 2:7, 110:1.

¹⁹⁶ Rev. 11:15.

In the Old Testament, a characteristic feature of eschatological hope is the notion of two ages: the present age and the age to come—a hope deeply rooted in Israel’s covenant faith.¹⁹⁷ And in the present age, the Kingdom of God—the reign and rule of the sovereign triune God—is experienced as *already* and *not yet*. In his concluding chapter of *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius writes of that day: “You will also know of his second glorious and truly divine manifestation to us, when he comes no longer in lowliness but in his own glory, no longer with humility but in his own magnificence, no longer to suffer but to bestow thenceforth the fruit of his own cross on all.”¹⁹⁸

Biblical revelation is the “relentlessly eschatological, forward-looking press of the biblical story, anticipating a future that God has prepared.”¹⁹⁹ With the catalytic events of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we reached the climax of the story, yet we strain forward to the final chapter when all will be restored fully, for the hero will return.²⁰⁰ Christ again will come down. Just as the redemptive arrow pointed down at the incarnation when “for us men and our salvation, he came down,” so the arrow will point down again upon his return.²⁰¹

At the close of history, “God the Father will bring his dwelling place, heaven itself, down to this world” to complete his redemptive work among us.²⁰² The Apostle John wrote of this in

¹⁹⁷ Routledge, 273.

¹⁹⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 56.

¹⁹⁹ J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 165

²⁰⁰ Matt. 26:64, Mark 14:62.

²⁰¹ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 226.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 228.

the final chapter of Revelation: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’”²⁰³ In this great drama of redemption and at every point in history, God comes down to us. As Christians, we anticipate the time when God completes the work of redemption and renewal and establishing his kingdom here on earth and restoring his creation. We will enjoy fellowship with the Father and Son for eternity.

²⁰³ Rev. 21:1, 3.

Appendix I

CREED OF NICAEA - 325 AD

We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign,
maker of all things seen and unseen.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
begotten from the Father as only-begotten, that is, from the Father's substance, God
from God, light from light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father,
through whom all things came into existence, the things in heaven
and the things on the earth,
who because of us men and our salvation, came down
and was incarnated, and was made man, suffered, and arose on the third day,
ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge the living and the dead.
And in the Holy Spirit.

And those who say, "There was once when he was not" or "He was not before he was
begotten" or "he came into existence from nothing" or who affirm that the Son of God is of
another *hypostasis* or substance, or a creature, or mutable or subject to change,
such ones the catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

CREED OF CONSTANTINOPLE – 381 AD (Nicene Creed)

We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign,
maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, who
was begotten from the Father before all the ages, light
from light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, *homoousios* with the Father, through
whom all things came into existence,
who because of us men and our salvation came down from heaven,
and was incarnated by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made man, was crucified on
our behalf by Pontius Pilate, and suffered,
and was buried, and arose on the third day according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right of the Father,
and is coming again with glory to judge the living and the dead,
of whose kingdom there will be no end.
And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, who makes us alive, who proceeds from the Father, who is
worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son,
who has spoken through the prophets.
In one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.
We confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the coming age. Amen.

Appendix II

The Main Stages in the Development of the Doctrine of Christ²⁰⁴

- *The Council of Nicaea (AD 325)* affirmed that Jesus Christ is truly God in an affirmation of faith against the Arians, who taught that Jesus was not of the same being as God and therefore not God but was the highest of creatures.
 - *If Jesus Christ were not fully God, he could not save us.*
- *The Council of Constantinople (AD 381)* affirmed that Jesus Christ was perfectly man, against the Apollinarians, who taught that the eternal Logos took the place of the human mind or spirit.
 - *If the Spirit were not just as fully God as the Father and the Son, he could not sanctify us.*
- *The Council of Ephesus (AD 431)* affirmed that Jesus Christ is one person, against the Nestorians, who divided Christ into two persons.
 - *It was really God the Son who was born for our salvation.*
- *The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)* affirmed that in Jesus Christ there are two distinct natures in one person and that in the one person of Christ they are hypostatically united “unconfusedly, inconvertibly, indivisibly, inseparably” or “without confusion, change division or separation.” This was affirmed against the Eutychians who taught a doctrine of two natures—one before the incarnation and one after with Christ’s human nature overcome in his divinity—and the Monophysites, who believed Christ only has one nature.
 - *It was really God the Son born as a man for our salvation.*

²⁰⁴ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 196-197, 346-347. The summary of the councils and the definitions are adapted from this work and lectures by Dr. Donald Fairbairn, CH/TH 668, The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary-Charlotte, Spring 2019. Summary statements in italics are taken from Dr. Fairbairn’s lectures.

- *The Council of Constantinople II (AD 553)* stated, the implication for the crucifixion of Christ declared at Ephesus/Chalcedon, which proclaimed the faith of the Church in the double birth of the Logos.
 - *If it was really God the Son who was born, then it was really God the Son who died for our salvation.*
- *The Council of Constantinople (AD 680/681)* asserted that Jesus Christ possessed a human will as well as a divine will, against the Monothelites, who taught that Jesus Christ had only one single will.
 - *If it was really God the Son who was born as a man for us, then he possesses divine and human wills.*

If it was really God the Son who was born as a man, then it was really the one person, Jesus Christ—God the Son, the Word who became flesh—who died for our salvation.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Dr. Donald Fairbairn, CH/TH 668, The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary-Charlotte, Spring 2019.

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